‘Da’/The Field

Da was one of those people. Very worldly. Loved the politics. He drew in many firm friends who chatted freely in his basement workshop. Religion didn’t matter to him.

Seeing our mother Sally, her pet name, pushing him gently out the door to late mass on Sundays. Always swapping his greasy cap for the ‘Tribly’ hat. We knew her devotion to him. She was the driving force in their relationship.

Art, he was often called, short for Arthur but mum Sally always spoke to him as Arthur. Enjoyed the craic of worldly discussions but never took part.

Often da drove us out to Ballymacnab. Our uncle Tommy, ma's brother lived near Seaghan Dam with our aunt Margie, their children. Our cousins. There were six of them. Only five of us. Was a mantra our big sister Noreen often referred to. Six of us cousins there might have been, we learned in much later years.

Our ma's first baby boy died at birth. Lying in final 'delivery' pains there was no doctor nearby. By

the time she travelled from Armagh Doctor Sheila delivered an exhausted dead baby. The nursing home ‘Carlton House’ in Portadown was where he died. There was no emergency treatment for difficult births.

We loved the rolling countryside that was known as ‘the Nab.’ Being able to skip to ‘the Bull’s Track’ too was magical. Where our parents met. Examining that large, imprinted stone left by the mythical bull.

In the mid 50s ‘B Specials’ were still on the ‘go,’ a leftover military reserve special constables of a

police organisation from the 1920s Irish Rebellion.

Dad loved on those balmy summer evenings to drive up the hill from the McGowan's cottage to visit his aunt. At their farm just over a mile away. Our grand aunt Kate loved to see him. She was that sister connection to his own mother who died very young. By then she was quite elderly. Now the sole custodian of the large family estate. Known as the 'McConey Place.' One particular autumn evening he was a little late returning as we all stood in the hedge below the hill. All giggles and restless.

Mum had our uncle Tom’s long black ‘funeral’ coat on. With his hat on her head. She carried a torch. That was no ordinary torch. She had the lens covered with red Christmas paper fastened on with an elastic band. The plan was to step out into the middle of the road. To wave him down for a search. B-special style. That plan worked. We knew it was him. He always drove with the head lights dimmed. As the car slowed down our laughter became louder. Though the instruction were for all us cousins to remain in the hedge a little longer. We peeped out. Mother’s torch waving worked.

The gruff voice our mam turned on worked as well. Stepping out of the car, a little unsteady from the Guinness his aunt usually kept for his visits.

Da was in a fluster. “Nothing to declare officer,” he nervously announced opening the boat. As our B-special mum pulled out the bottle of Guinness, she dropped it. Crashing to the ground. The game was up.

We all appeared then. The laughter louder as father began to laugh too. Hugging my mother

with relief. His aunt Katie died the following year. In her will she left our Da one of her fields. A field was a treasure then. So close to our cousins' home. There were all sorts of plans for that field. Some years later. Out of the blue. Katie's sons came to Keady on a 'fair day.' Those special days brought many country folk to Keady. Selling their cows, pigs or goats at the monthly fair.

Tom along with Paddy and even James called to our home inviting Dad out to the pub that evening. Our mother was annoyed. Very suspicious of their sudden appearance. It was quite a few

months until he disclosed that time in the pub. All his many bottles of booze bought by those three nephews.

I remember Da sometimes. When I visit my brother James. On the stairs, of our old home. The cycle shop. Now closed. Standing up on his toes looking out that landing window across the fields. We know he wishes he had kept that field. Built the cottage home on it. For mam’s and his retirement. Out near where he was born. Where Sally grew up too. Just over the hill in our uncle’s home. Cross too that he had signed it over to his wealthy

nephews. Those wishful chats we overheard from time to time as the years rolled by.

Our mum died suddenly at the age of sixty-seven. In the hospital at Craigavon. Da wouldn’t come with me the day we were summoned to her bedside. “I want to remember as she was before this time,” he said. Living on for sixteen more years we treasured those visits. Taking him to the pub and joining in the craic.

He smoked a pipe from as far back as we remember. The cough he had in later years was easily treated by a bottle of Benylin.

That cough mixture, prescribed, by his G.P was his treasure. A mixture the new G.P decided to cease prescribing. You couldn’t buy it off the shelf then.

Admitted to hospital, his lungs full of fluid, we knew he was dying. It’s freely available now that cough bottle. Even in some supermarkets. We all were with him that day as he lay peacefully in a side room. A ward where I last nursed in. Before leaving my nursing post. The staff were my former colleagues.

As he looked up at the ceiling his eyes moved slowly as if he

saw something. He smiled as his eye lids softly closed. Holding his hand on that Valentine’s day, February the fourteenth, we knew he saw our mam in the cottage on the field as he sat by the hearth smoking his pipe, blinking and winking.

Keady Chapel was being renovated. It was closed the day of his funeral. A now disused factory built and owned by his cousins. A well established ‘Paving Company’ was in temporary use for mass and funerals. His coffin lay there overnight. In the McGlones. Building of that wealthy firm.

Their lorries parked in neat rows outside.

Walking behind his coffin to the graveyard, we were ‘stumped’ at the coincidence of that time. Passing our old house, we saw the rainbow. That rainbow hovered over our street. Wrapped there just over our home. It gave us all so much comfort. The feeling of forgiveness holding together all those memories. Memories of living there. Those happiest of times. The music and the craic.